After the End of Thought

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Tracy Strong’s *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* is a book about—among many other things—the complex mix of self-assertion, responsiveness to a world, and acknowledgment of others that is involved in becoming a subject with a perspective and a voice of one’s own. Understood in this way, it is also a book that exemplifies what it argues. It’s not uncommon for a book by an eminent senior scholar to have the kind of transparency of voice that this one does: any reader who knows Strong will find him unmistakably present in its pages. It is somewhat less common for an immediately recognizable book by an eminent senior scholar also to be deeply marked by the friction of its encounter with new problems: this is not just a pleasantly lucid distillation of things we’ve heard from Strong before. And it is remarkable for such a book to avow its debts to others as prominently as this one does: in its very title and subtitle, we already hear not just Strong’s voice but also Sheldon Wolin’s and Hannah Arendt’s. At one level, then, Strong tells the story of a series of seven authors—Nietzsche, Weber, Lenin, Freud, Schmitt, Heidegger, and Arendt—who, following Kant, seek to understand human subjectivity as a project and accomplishment, and not just as a fact about us; but who (even more than Kant) are concerned to do this without recourse to “visions” or “banisters,” a scruple that puts them in a liminal position in relation to the
philosophical traditions that precede them. But Strong’s own book is also involved in the same play of proximity and distance in relation to those traditions, and to his seven authors, and indeed to the framing language he draws from Arendt and Wolin. In what follows I want to pose three sets of questions about this mix of continuity and discontinuity both in the work of the authors Strong examines, and in his own (and our own) relation to these interlocutors.

1.

I’ll begin with a terminological question: what are “visions” and “banisters,” exactly? Often, Strong’s uses of these terms, and especially the latter, seem to refer to what we used to call “epistemological foundations.” He begins his book by saying that the phrase “thinking without a banister,” for Arendt, “meant for her that humans no longer could rely on any transcendental grounding to finalize their thinking” (1, emphasis added). What this amounts to is the idea that action cannot be underwritten by “complete” knowledge of the world, not because there are things we should know but cannot, but because “human understanding [is] not exhausted in the act of knowing.” Absent the banister of knowledge, we are compelled to relate to the world aesthetically; which means: we acknowledge the “presence of the incomprehensible” and, consequently, we recognize that “what one says about it is necessarily in and only in one’s own voice,” a recognition that “necessarily opens and relates one to others making a judgment of their own” (13). What sets Strong’s authors off from the tradition that precedes them, it seems, is that all take up the challenge of thinking without banisters in this sense, radicalizing Kant’s critique of knowledge under the weight of their anticipation or experience of the horrors of the twentieth century.
Yet by focusing on the question of whether politics is grounded in knowledge, Strong may overstate the discontinuity between his cast of characters and their predecessors. One way to see this is to ask about the relation between his subtitle and his title. Why would Strong want to say that a form of thought or understanding that tried to do without the banisters of finality offered by cognition would also be “without vision” in Wolin’s sense, given that Wolin introduced the idea of “vision” precisely as a correlate of what he calls “the imaginative element in political thought”—that which goes beyond descriptive reportage and “propositions that seek to prove or disprove,” in order to “illuminate”? To be sure, Wolin himself moved very quickly from imagination *per se* to a specific deployment of imagination by the political theorist, exemplified by Plato and called “architectonic,” in which “the political imagination attempts to mold the totality of political phenomena to accord with some vision of the Good that lies outside the political order,” which would seem to take us back into the register of knowledge. Notice, however, that even on Wolin’s description, an architectonic theorist like Plato is not *in the first instance* a knower; he is, instead, one who *imagines knowledge*: that is, who imagines a political world in which knowledge (of the Good, for instance) would play a controlling role. What is primary in the figure of the architectonic theorist is not his claim to knowledge but the relation of command over materials and people, which a claim to knowledge may *then* be used to support (the “architect” is, literally, the master or ruler of builders).

But this suggests, first, that the appeal to a transcendental grounding and the aesthetic relation to the world are not mutually exclusive alternatives: instead, the former may be a variety of the latter. And, second and consequently, even the abandonment of the claim to knowledge may not in itself be sufficient to provoke a recognition of the claim of others to their own voice, since it is, in itself, merely the abandonment of one means to the imagined end of security in
command. There may well be others, as Strong shows us in giving us a cast of characters who are quite uneven in their acknowledgment that, as he puts it, “for one to have one’s own voice, others must have a voice also” (85), and whose insistent framing of politics in terms of hierarchy remains quite traditional, their rejection of foundationalism notwithstanding. Indeed, one could make this point even while staying with the language of “banisters,” for a banister isn’t only a support that holds us up if we begin to fall, but a guide that facilitates movement by orienting perception: exhibiting a trajectory visually, it can help us judge the steepness of a set of stairs, or alert us to the fact that we’re about to encounter a step where we might not expect one. So “thinking without a banister” may mean not just thinking without knowing, but also letting one’s thinking wander off the paths to which we’re accustomed. The image of political relations as relations of rule or command may represent one such path, to which some of Strong’s authors hew all too closely. I’ll return to this issue.

2.

The question of how far and in what ways Strong’s interlocutors depart from a tradition that precedes them, whether we describe that tradition as architectonic or banister-bound or in some other way, is inseparable from the question of how they relate to Kant, and also from the question of Kant’s own position in these matters, since he is the figure whom all these “twentieth century” thinkers both emulate and radicalize. (We can admit Nietzsche to the twentieth-century club in virtue of having been born posthumously.) Here, however, rather than press back against Strong in the spirit of Arendt’s critique of “rule,” I want to suggest that Strong’s picture of Kant may itself be too strongly inflected, retroactively, by his reading of Arendt—by which I mean
not that this is an illegitimate way to take up the Kantian legacy, but that it risks downplaying the other elements of Kant’s thought, and, consequently, the other paths out of Kant, that in fact did lead some of Strong’s thinkers in very different directions. I’ll do this by presenting and perhaps exaggerating two enormous differences between Kant and Arendt, one of which has to do with the relative weight of production and reception in their work, and the other of which has to do with the fact that he remains a philosopher while she disowns what she considers philosophy’s habit of thinking about a single human being as exemplary of all others.

When Arendt interprets and appropriates Kant, she emphasizes his account of how judgment can demand the attention of others without being able to command their agreement—in short, his account of the (intersubjective) structure of aesthetic reception. In doing this, however, she leaves behind the systematic connection between the third Critique and the first two. This connection is not just at the level of “metacritique”; the third Critique is not just an attempt to account for the authority of Kant’s own critical voice (32). It is also at the level of substance. The third Critique continues Kant’s struggle with one of the basic problems of the first Critique; namely, how the two basic elements contributed by the subject to cognition, sensibility and concepts, could ever be made to fit together, since they seem utterly heterogeneous to each other—a question he addresses in the infamously obscure chapter on the “schematism,” and through an account of the role of productive imagination in this work of mediation. And the third Critique also takes up the problem of how the pictures of the world on which the first and second Critiques depend—the world as governed by causal laws and the world as a site of freedom—could be reconciled. In both cases, the third Critique proceeds philosophically, i.e., through a consideration of what is true for the human being as such and in the singular. It also proceeds by bringing production rather than reception into the foreground:
first, in its exploration of the interaction of imagination and understanding in the genius’s production of beautiful art (an interaction that Kant initially casts in terms of “free play” but eventually redescribes hierarchically, referring to the need for the “imagination in its freedom” to be subordinated to the “lawfulness of the understanding”9); and, second, in its suggestion that we cannot help but understand nature (the site of causality) as a purposive whole, which is to say, as intelligently produced in something like the way we produce artifacts, even if we can have no knowledge of what its purposes really are—a suggestion that is meant to give us a hint, though not a proof, that the natural world has been produced so as to provide a hospitable environment for the exercise of free will. (This may not be Platonic, but it remains, in its own way, architectonic.)

I note all of this because these problems, and not only the reflexive questions about critique and voice on which Strong focuses, are among the crucial points at which at least some of Strong’s twentieth-century figures engage Kant. This is true especially of Heidegger, whose extended treatment of Kant in texts like *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*—which was focused precisely on the problem represented by the schematism in the first *Critique*—makes only a passing appearance in Strong’s chapter.10 One might say (to shift back to an Arendtian mode) that part of Heidegger’s problem was that he engaged those meta-questions about critique and voice while also remaining wedded, before and after 1933, to a practice of philosophy that never managed to take plurality seriously in the right way,11 and that this may have been partly responsible for his oscillation between the assertive, productive or at least self-productive stance of *Being and Time*, and the sheerly receptive stance of openness to the event of Being toward which he moved during and after the war. (I do not think he integrates these stances successfully, though he tries.12) Attending to these problems would also make it possible to find
a place in this story for the one figure whose absence from Strong’s book I felt acutely, namely Adorno, who is interestingly like Heidegger in his focus on the schematism, but importantly unlike him in his philosophical mode: in his remarkable lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for instance, Adorno suggests that what Kant represses in the first *Critique* is not the productive imagination as such, or the whole dimension of Dasein’s being-in-the-world (for Heidegger in 1929 these amount to the same thing), but the necessary impurity of the supposedly pure forms of intuition, the dependence of the intuitions of space and time on particular spatial and temporal things, and thus the dependence of philosophy on a materiality that its impulse to formalization—still present in Heidegger’s distinction between the ontological and the merely ontic—can never quite master.¹³

3.

First, decisions must be debated fully, but once they have been taken, by majority vote, they are binding on all members. This is necessary if we are to test our ideas in action.

Scandalously, a minority inside the [Party] are refusing to accept the democratically reached conference decisions. What they...are arguing for is a different model involving a much looser and weaker leadership, internal debate that continually reopens decisions already made, and permanent factions (currently factions are only allowed in the discussion period leading up to the
annual party conference). If they succeeded, the [Party] would become a much smaller and less effective organisation....

These passages are from the same text, but not, as one might initially suspect, from a text of Lenin’s. They are drawn instead from a recent statement, “Is Leninism Finished?,”14 issued by Alex Callinicos on behalf of the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party (UK), which (at the time these comments on Strong’s book were originally delivered) was in the thick of a crisis most proximately caused by its internal handling of allegations of rape and sexual harassment against a senior party member, but which also implicated issues of party discipline, secrecy, the legitimacy of the “bourgeois” police and courts, the legitimacy of the party’s own internal dispute procedures, the legitimacy of open discussion and dissent within the party, the question of generational transition within the party (as much but not all of the protest within the party was coming from university branches), and, last but by no means least, the question of “feminism” within a party that has taken official positions supportive of “women’s issues” but in which the word “feminism” is also sometimes used as the name of a factionalizing heresy. And the “decisions” to which the statement refers include especially the decision to accept a the report of an internal party disciplinary committee that had been convened to address the allegations, but whose competence and honesty many members subsequently came to doubt.15

At one level, the crisis in the SWP might be seen as an all-too-familiar symptom of the collision between a party that professes to be in some sense democratic and the iron law of oligarchy, as a leadership interested in perpetuating its own power closes ranks against a challenge from the membership. But it also raises important theoretical questions, especially about those thinkers in Strong’s book who conceive of political authority and voice as in
significant part a function of *professionalism*. Weber and Lenin do this, and they also identify professionalism as an epistemic virtue: for Weber it is the source of the discipline required to recognize and take account even of “inconvenient facts”\(^{16}\); for Lenin, as for Callinicos, it is the condition both of this willingness to endure inconvenient facts in the name of “comprehensiveness” (193) and of the control, in the sense of experimental control, needed to be able to submit a political decision to a valid practical test of its truth.

But what conception of “truth” would you need to embrace in order for it *not* to seem like a patent contradiction to root political authority in an attitude of self-criticism, an acknowledgment of fallibility, and a norm of responsibility to *all* facts, and simultaneously to suppose that political authority, thus grounded, could be confined to a circle of well-formed professionals? At the very least, you would need to think that the unauthorized utterances of others were not themselves among the facts to which a professional politician had a responsibility; or, to put it concretely, you would need to think that the accelerating resignations and defections from the SWP, and the corresponding accounts of how the Party’s conduct looks from a rank-and-file-perspective, were *merely* instances of disobedience or heresy and thus not worth taking seriously—which is all well and good until you find yourself leading the rump of a party. What Strong calls deafness to the voice of others may go hand in hand with a blindness to the fact of others. And this is both an illustration of the persistence of banisters and visions—of an essentially hierarchical imagination of politics—in Weber and Lenin; and an indication of why the analysis of the aesthetic dimension in political theory cannot afford to think of itself as leaving questions of knowledge behind.

Finally, since a discipline is, among other things, an apparatus for the formation of subjects who are entitled to a professional voice, the theme of professional politics brings me in
conclusion to the theme of professional political theory, and back to Strong’s use of Sheldon Wolin’s work as a point of reference. One of the things that has always struck me about, say, the combination of Wolin’s essays with John Schaar on the campus politics of the sixties, and Wolin’s “Political Theory as a Vocation,” is that while they are sometimes casually glossed as expressions of enthusiasm about the renewal of democratic and critical energy after the sleepy conformism of the fifties, the essays on campus politics were already suffused with the atmosphere of loss as early as 1966, as though mourning the fact that what could have amounted to a genuine revolution had failed to live up to that possibility;\(^1\) while “Political Theory as a Vocation” affirms the importance of the study of the history of political thought as a fundamentally conservative enterprise, in which new generations are “initiated” into maturity through the patient transmission of the accumulated insight of their predecessors.\(^2\) Strong positions himself partly in opposition to Wolin, or at least to the ease with which Wolin appears to dismiss theorists whose views do not, in his judgment, rise to the standard of a vision. Yet Strong’s own aims remain ambiguous here. From one angle he appears to be extending Wolin’s tradition into the twentieth century; from another, he appears to be “extending” it via theorists whose work, in effect if not always in intention, calls into question the adequacy of the very idea of a tradition, of the steady transgenerational transmission of a body of wisdom through the study of a canon—even an expansive canon—of professionally authorized texts. This ambiguity is not a fault in Strong’s book. It is more like a fault-line running under our discipline, whose institutional settings, pedagogical practices, and rhetorical forms often express a hierarchical imagination of the enterprise of political theory, even and sometimes especially when their “content” is professedly egalitarian. Rumbling through Politics without Vision, then, is a question not just for Strong but for his readers: what is the nature and what are the purposes of an
education in political theory, especially in light of what Strong and his interlocutors teach us about the interdependence of one’s own voice and the voice, and fact, of others?

NOTES

1. An earlier version of these comments was delivered at a symposium on Tracy Strong’s *Politics without Vision* at the UCLA Political Theory Workshop in 2012, organized by Kirstie McClure. I’m grateful to her, Mary Dietz, Linda Zerilli, and especially to Tracy Strong for the occasion and the conversation it produced.


5. “Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words ‘block’, ‘pillar’, ‘slab’, ‘beam’. A calls them out; — B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. — — Conceive this as a complete primitive language.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958], § 2.) “Instead of the feeling that the builders lack understanding, I find I feel that they lack imagination, or rather lack freedom, or perhaps that they are on the threshold of these together.” (Stanley Cavell, “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s Investigations,” in The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein, ed. Hans Sluga and David Stern [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 292.)

6. For a powerful account of the political limits of the call to “acknowledge” various epistemic or ontological conditions, see George Shulman, “Acknowledgment and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 1 (2011).

8. I mean this to resonate with and also complicate Strong’s citation of Heidegger’s slogan “paths, not works” (291), which is related to Heidegger’s suggestion, with the title Holzwege, that he is out to recover overgrown, seemingly dead-end forest-paths. See the discussion of the complex connotations of Holzwege in the translators’ introduction to Martin Heidegger, Off the Beaten Track, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ix.


12. As Peter Gordon has shown in his brilliant reconstruction of the Davos debate between Heidegger and Cassirer, and of the book that emerged from it (Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics), “spontaneous receptivity” was one idea through which Heidegger tried to integrate these stances—though even in the Kant book, on my view, that phrase served more to name a problem than to resolve it. See Peter E. Gordon, Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).


